

Presenting a United Front: Parental Involvement Facilitating Children's Literacy Development

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Abstract

Literacy development is recognised across both education policy and research literature as essential for educational success. Historically, literacy has mainly been a focus for teachers within the classroom, however a growing body of research has established correlations between parental involvement and students' literacy achievement. This literature review critiques the body of research examining the relationship between both home-based and school-based parental involvement and literacy development. Studies have consistently found positive associations between parental involvement in literacy practices and students' literacy achievement. Research indicates that despite these positive correlations, many parents do not engage in literacy practices with their children. This review discusses the barriers which prevent some families from engaging in these literacy practices with their children and presents a New Zealand case study highlighting a home-school partnership programme which addresses these barriers with the goal of raising student literacy achievement. Through the conclusions drawn from the critique of the research and case study presented, this literature review establishes best practice for parents and teachers and suggests relevant direction for future research into home-school partnership programmes aimed at increasing parental involvement.

Keywords: *Parental Involvement, Literacy Development, School-Based Involvement, Home-Based Involvement, Home-School Partnerships, Literacy Practices, Literacy Achievement, Educational Barriers*



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Introduction

In New Zealand and around the world, the importance of literacy education for both academic and professional success within a given culture or society appears as a consistent theme across policy and literature ([Biddulph, Biddulph & Biddulph, 2003](#); Levy, 2011). Over the course of the twenty and twenty-first centuries, understandings of literacy have been reconceptualised from being solely understood as the ability to read and write, to encompassing socio-cultural awareness and reflective thinking ([Bailey 2009](#); [Knobel & Lankshear 2014](#); [Limbrick & Aikman, 2005](#)). However, all children do not develop literacy abilities equally. The challenge for educators and policymakers is to understand how literacy develops and implement strategies which foster its development. Parental involvement here is defined as both home-based and school-based activities. Research reports that parental involvement, which includes parental aspirations and communication with their children about school, is one of the most important variables for enriching children's literacy development ([Jeynes, 2012](#)). However, studies show that families are not equally involved in practices which support their children's education ([Biddulph et al., 2003](#); [Gonzalez, 2013](#)).

With such variation in practices reported, it raises the question as to how families' can be supported to engage in literacy practices. In evaluating the research which denotes how parental

involvement facilitates literacy development, this literature review will attempt to shed light on the barriers inhibiting some families from engaging in literacy practices, present possible implications for research and practice moving forward and examine a case study from New Zealand presenting a Home-School Partnership programme attempting to raise parental involvement levels..

Facilitating Literacy Development

According to the meta-analysis completed by [Jeynes \(2012\)](#), the large body of research examining parental involvement in literacy development documents positive associations between family literacy practices and children's literacy outcomes across all levels of education. Findings from several studies support the notion that parental literacy practices impact upon children's emergent literacy development. Research conducted by [Weigel, Martin and Bennett \(2006\)](#) which examined mothers' beliefs about literacy development, suggests that activities including storytelling, shared-book reading, drawing, singing and game playing, all positively correlate with children's interest in reading, print and letter-sound knowledge, oral language and word decoding skills. Similarly, [Levy, Gong, Hessels, Evans and Jared \(2006\)](#) explored children's early development of orthographic and visual understanding of print in relation to reading acquisition. The participants included 474 children between the

ages of 48-83 months who completed standardised measures of reading skills and phonological awareness, whilst their parents completed a questionnaire providing data on their home literacy practices. The study found that parents' encouragement and direction toward participation in literacy activities most reliably predicted the development of their children's literacy abilities. In their review of the literature concerned with children's emergent literacy skills, [Evans and Shaw \(2008\)](#) reported that, in addition to encouragement, children who experience enjoyment in combination with direction are more likely to adopt the literacy skills their parents teach them. Although this research indicates that the literacy practices which parents engage in are in themselves influential, the influence of the home environment and the children's agency in literacy development cannot be overlooked. [Weigel et al. \(2006\)](#) categorised the total sum of book reading, television watching and magazine or newspaper subscriptions as elements of the home environment which positively related to emergent literacy skills in kindergarten children. Correspondingly, [Levy et al. \(2006\)](#) noted that literacy activities which children involve themselves in correlate with print knowledge.

Several longitudinal studies support the correlations [Weigel et al. \(2006\)](#) and [Levy et al. \(2006\)](#) found between parental involvement and literacy development. The study conducted by [Dearing, Simpkins, Krieder and Weiss \(2006\)](#) examined a sample of ethnically diverse, low-income families to investigate whether correlations existed between literacy development and family involvement, with a moderating effect of maternal education. [Dearing et al. \(2006\)](#) reported that mothers' education levels were associated with an achievement gap in average literacy performance between primary aged students, however, for high parent involvement levels, this gap was eliminated. Extending upon these findings, [Deckner, Adamson and Bakeman \(2006\)](#) examined the effect of mothers' home literacy practices on their children's interest in reading and development of language from the age of 18 months until 42 months and found that it was not solely the existence of parental involvement in literacy practices that had an influence, rather, the frequency and length of time mothers spent reading to children and the age of the child when the mother began the reading to them were predictive of children's language development.

Although the foundations for literacy development are set in early childhood and primary years, parental involvement remains important in the secondary school years. According to Singh, Bickley, Trivette, Keith, Keith & Anderson (1995) parental involvement in the form of parental aspirations have the strongest positive effect on raising student achievement at secondary school level. Singh et al. (1995) suggests that parental aspirations lead to positive communication between children and parents about school. This finding is reinforced by [Clinton and Hattie \(2013\)](#) who explored high school students' perceptions of their achievement and parental involvement through questionnaires measuring parental involvement, efficacy, liking of and achievement in reading and maths, completed by 1554 students across 59 New Zealand schools. The student responses indicated that they are supportive of their parents engaging in conversations about learning and holding high expectations of them. While the design of this study does not allow the authors to infer causation between parental involvement and student achievement, it adds value to the body of research by capturing student perspective on aspects of parental involvement which could form a relevant basis for further research.

How Beneficial Is Parental Involvement?

Within the literature on parental involvement, a minor selection of studies challenge the significance of the role of parental involvement in literacy development. The cross-national analysis of parental involvement and student literacy by [Hampton-Thompson, Guzman and Lippman \(2013\)](#) established that the association between parental involvement and student literacy exists across international contexts. However, [Hampton-Thompson et al. \(2013\)](#) question whether parental involvement always improves educational outcomes. The study found a distinction between home-based and school-based parental involvement, in that school-based involvement is linked to children's involvement in school, however, some home-based involvement, such as assistance or supervision of homework is associated with poorer academic performance because it often happens as an attempt to remedy a student's poor academic performance. The cross-sectional design and high school specific sample which make up this study mean that the authors cannot make causal inferences or generalisations to other age groups. However, the correlations reported resemble the results reported in [Clinton and Hattie's \(2013\)](#) secondary school study which found, that teacher-parent interactions had a negative effect on achievement. In line with [Hampton-Thompson et al. \(2013\)](#), [Clinton and Hattie \(2013\)](#) suggest that the parents of lower achieving students may be more likely to have interactions with teachers and in turn students may interpret this negatively as being controlling.

Rather than calling into question the beneficial elements of parental involvement altogether, these studies work to highlight elements of parental involvement that appear to have detrimental effects under certain conditions. These findings appear noteworthy for researchers to investigate in larger longitudinal experimental studies where stronger effects could be established.

Barriers to Parental Involvement

Although prior research indicates that parental involvement positively influences children's literacy development, there is substantial variance between the levels of literacy practices parents engage in. This raises the question as to what factors prevent parents from being involved in their children's literacy education. The Best Evidence Synthesis (BES) by [Biddulph et al. \(2003\)](#) addressing the complexity of community and family influence on children's achievement in New Zealand identified socio-economic status and ethnicity as family attributes which were associated with children's achievement. Parents from minority ethnic groups, with a lower socio-economic status had less access to resources to support their children's learning. Other parental attributes, including weak knowledge of appropriate teaching pedagogies, low levels of parental education and absence of English as a home language were associated with lower achievement. Additionally, instabilities in the home environment such as a change to the family structure, health problems or regular relocation of the family unit were negatively associated with children's achievement ([Biddulph et al., 2003](#)). These theories are reinforced by [Gonzalez \(2013\)](#) who investigated whether parents' socioeconomic status, level of education, employment, culture, and language influenced involvement in their children's literacy development in the home. [Gonzalez \(2013\)](#) examined interview and demographic data collected from 17 parents with a child in kindergarten to identify

trends. The analysis found that long working hours impacted on how much time parents were able to spend engaging with their child in literacy activities, low-income impacted on parents' ability to purchase literacy resources for their children, parents' own English language fluency impacted on the number of strategies they were able to utilise to assist their children with literacy activities and a lack of multicultural literature in kindergartens impacted on parents' sense of value ([Gonzalez, 2013](#)). While the sample size in this study and the age-specific demographic of the participants means the findings cannot be generalised, they do suggest that factors in the home environment impact the quality and amount of literacy activities which parents provide for their children.

Building on this idea, Levy (2011) suggests that because each child's literacy development is a unique and multifaceted process embedded in socio-cultural structures, children and their parents often face challenges entering formal education as their home literacy practices differ from school practices. This idea is examined in the study by [Marsh and Thompson \(2001\)](#) which drew on parents' cultural capital through developing literacy resources for parents to support home literacy practices based on children's interests. The study reported that the books available in nurseries were not congruent with their interests and the resources available in their homes. Data was collected from the children's parents and of the 15 that were surveyed, 14 reported that the incorporation of children's television interests to build literacy practices was valuable. While it is recognised that a limitation of this study is that it relies on the accuracy of participants self-reporting, the design allowed researchers to examine the use of home knowledge for literacy education and highlighted the potential importance of exploiting children's sociocultural knowledge for effective facilitation of their learning. Further research into this area with a larger and more diverse sample size would work to strengthen these conclusions.

Case Study

Traditionally, New Zealand schools have worked independently from homes and families ([Brooking, 2007](#)). However, since the 1990s, New Zealand's educators and policymakers have been concerned by the disparity between the literacy levels of the highest and lowest achieving students, many of whom are of Maori or Pasifika descent ([Tunmer, Chapman, Greany, Prochnow & Arrow, 2013](#)). In their BES, [Biddulph et al. \(2003\)](#) advocate for the implementation of programmes which foster genuine collaboration between the school and home and incorporate resources and information which add to family literacy practices rather than undermining them.

In an effort to improve literacy outcomes for students, the Ministry of Education developed the Home-School Partnership Literacy Programme in 2001, which focused on building stronger relationships between schools and their culturally diverse parents through raising levels of parental involvement in both primary and secondary schools. The programme involved the selection of parent leaders to represent wider cultural groups within the community to train alongside teachers with the aim of becoming facilitators for discussion between school representatives and parents at regularly held parent sessions. These parent sessions were set up to teach parents about the curriculum and ways to support learning at home. Parents were encouraged to share their home learning practices, which would then be communicated to the teaching staff who could incorporate them into their practice. NZCER researchers evaluated the programme by examining six

case studies from schools through focus groups over the course 2006–2007 ([Brooking & Roberts, 2007](#)). The researchers found that 85 percent of the participating schools were positive about the relationships they had established with families. Furthermore, 80 percent reported the programme had a positive effect on opportunities to learn and 75 percent reported a minor positive effect on engagement attitudes, confidence and literacy achievement.

Despite the two-way design of the programme, 70 percent of teachers reported that it was very important that parents learnt about children's literacy from teachers ([Brooking, 2007](#)). In line with [Bæck \(2010\)](#), this finding suggests that knowledge was not shared equally between parents and teachers, which may impact on teachers' views and willingness to incorporate home literacy practices into their teaching practice. It appears this initiative is lacking clear boundaries and responsibilities between teachers and parents which, as [Ludicke and Kortman \(2012\)](#) suggest, are important. This is an element that would be relevant for future programme designs to address. However, creating equal and trusting partnerships takes time. Therefore, designing implementing a sequential research study which combines cross-sectional and longitudinal methods could simultaneously dispel some of extraneous variables which make the current research associative as opposed to causal and more adequately measure impacts on literacy achievement in the long-term.

Conclusion

Overall, the research reviewed largely supports the notion that children's literacy development is enriched through parental involvement. While further research is needed to establish the causal directions of the relationship between parental involvement and literacy development due to the associative nature of the body of research as a whole, it does suggest involvement is better conducted through parental beliefs, aspirations, encouragement, and communication, than by engaging in teacher-parent interactions in response to poor performance and implementing controlling practices. Families from minority ethnic groups and those of lower socio-economic status face greater barriers to parental involvement, however, it appears that inconsistency across parent and teacher perceptions of parental involvement have the greatest impact on parental involvement. Home-School Partnership programmes present an opportunity to break down the barriers which inhibit parental involvement in their children's literacy development. However, their long-term success relies equal partnerships formed on an agreement of joint responsibility between teachers and parents and a shift in thinking from teachers to be genuinely open to learning from parents; an element that was missing from the Home-School Partnership Programme ([Brooking, 2007](#); [Biddulph et al. 2003](#)). Relevant future direction for research could expand upon the research by [Ludicke and Kortman \(2012\)](#) by exploring the ways in which responsibilities and boundaries could be effectively established between parents and teachers.

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